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ABSTRACT

After 1989, because of political and social change in the Czech Republic, a new and effective system of school governance developed. Before this date, schools were closely tied to central controlling bodies; however, in recent years, there has been a tendency to set up a system in which schools can become an open and organic part of their local environment. Central ways of governing schools have gradually been transformed into a new system of school governance in which the local community plays an important role. Boards of governors can be seen as the main element of the new school governance system. This paper is based on a study that analyzed relevant legislation, school documentation, and public discussion of the last 7 years in the Czech Republic. The study included interviews with school leaders, parent representatives, and representatives of local educational authorities. Findings indicate that agents of change have not yet managed to introduce the idea of local school governance in a successful way. It also appears evident that there is a need for the management of the whole process. At the moment, boards of governors in the Czech Republic are often viewed by many practitioners as a good idea; however, the immediate practical benefit of these boards is rather questionable. (DFR)

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On the process of setting up boards of governors in the Czech Republic and its the main determinants.

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One of the consequences of political and social changes taking place in the Czech Republic after 1989 has been an effort to develop a new and effective system of school governance. While until 1989 the schools were closely and strongly tied to the central bodies controlling and determinating large scope of their work, recent years were dominated by a tendency to set up a system in which schools would become an open and organic part of their local environment. Centralistic way of governing schools is gradually transformed into a new system of school governance in which the local community plays an important role. Boards of governors can be seen as the main element of the new school governance system.

This paper is based on the analysis of the relevant legislation, the school documentation, and public discussions of the last 7 years, and also on interviews with the school leaders, parent representatives, representatives of local educational authorities, and other parties involved in the process of the local school governance system's development in the Czech Republic.

There can be identified three phases of the local school governance system's introduction:

1. November 1989 - September 1993.

A period of intensive public discussions and efforts to find a way of changing the previous centralistic system. There were published several proposals of a new conception of the school system and its management. Only in some of them the phenomenon of boards of governors were involved. The school politicians did not accept any completed proposal. The main results of this period were as follows:

* a set up of local educational authorities (meant to serve as a liasion between schools and the government)
* an introduction of self-governing bodies (set up of school commissions operating on several levels: from the central level - parliament to the local one)
* rather clear distinction of three mutually independent streams of the education system management: the Czech school inspection, state administration, and self-governance.

In this phase school boards (built on the level of school district) appeared as a new phenomenon in the system. School boards were meant to represent local communities, parents, and educators. The boards have power to discuss with the LEA development and performance of schools within the district, and also to influence hiring of the heads of the schools concerned. School boards appeared to be, however, too far from the schools, too slow to react, and unable to play an important role in the system.

Boards of governors did not get into the legislation of the period concerned. At few schools bodies resembling them were set up, though - mostly as a result of parents' initiative.

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2. September 1993-Spring 1996.

On September 1, 1993 the Ministry's of Education has recommended each primary, secondary and special school to set up a board of governors on an experimental basis. The ministry directive defines the role and composition of the boards of governors as follows:
- The board of governors is an independent body, with a role to play in supervision, counselling and information. The boards has a co-ordinating function as regards the school's relations with parents, prospective employers of pupils and the community. The purpose of the board is to defend the interests of pupils.
- The board of governors evaluates the school's activity, especially in the area of education itself. It helps the head to develop the school's contacts with parents, the community and other partners.
- Establishment of the board of governors is initiated by the head. Whether or not board adopts a constituion is for the parents and other interested parties to decide.
- The board of governors consists of:
* elected representatives of parents and (in the case of secondary schools) of pupils;
* delegated representatives of the local community, of employers' organisations, and of other interested parties;
* representatives of the school.

Each of these groups has roughly one-third of the places on the board, unless some other distributions is agreed upon.

- The board of governors elects from its members a chairman, who manages the board's activities, negotiates with the school inspectorate and other bodies, and is mandated to act on behalf of the school.

The board of governors gives its opinion on the following matters:
* the educational achievements of the school;
* the solving of pedagogical problems;
* the efficiency of the teaching process;
* the curriculum;
* the number of pupils;
* the school finances;
* staffing matters;
* work plans.

- The board of governors approves the annual report of the school.

- The board co-operates closely with the school head but can question his decisions.

The material mentioned was accepted with criticism by school politicians as well as schools, parents, and other interested parties. A low level of clarity of the material, and a totally noncommital nature of it for boards of governors worried school leaders most of all.

During first 18 months of the experiment about 150 boards of governors were set up at basic schools, and another 20 boards at secondary schools. In general, it was about 1,5-2% of the schools.

3. Spring 1996 - until now

It has been the amendment of the School Act No. 564/1990 from spring 1996 which anchored boards of governors in legislation relatively firmly. This way the present state of the boards of governors has been determined.

According to the legislation mentioned, boards of governors are understand to be bodies which can (do not have to) be set up (and also cancelled) at the school by the founder of the school on the basis of the interest of groups involved (parents, students major of age, school employees, local community representatives, and other persons).

The board of governors consists of 5-16 members, the school head is not a member of it. Members are elected (or nominated) for the 2-year period. In case of state and church schools 1/3 of members is nominated by the founder, 1/3 is elected by parents or students who are major of age, and 1/3 is elected by the school employees. In case of private schools there are slight modifications.

As for the competencies, the board of governors:
* approves annual school report, budget proposal, financial report
* gives its opinion on curriculum, plans of the school's development, hiring and firing of the school head
* can suggest firing the school head
* can invite the Czech school inspection and the LEA to control economy of the school, and some other aspects of the school's performance.

The development of the school local governance system in the Czech Republic has been accompanied with the following pressures and tendencies:

1. political pressure on the decentralisation of the education system
2. political pressure on and tendency of the schools towards school autonomy, and in many cases also schools´ opting out
3. political pressure on democratisation of the education system
4. pressure on openess of schools to their external environment
5. pressure on access of local community groups into schools and their governance

Analysis of the legislation, public discussions, and also practical experience of the people involved indicate that main controversies of the process of boards of governors' set up can be seen in:

1. the absence of tradition of the school local governance, no experience with a body like board of governors

2. the very strategy of boards of governors' set up - the main initiative was left on school leaders. These:
* may not feel a need for having governing body at their school site - moreover even without their participation
* seem to be very much busy with performing in their totally new roles in managing rather autonomous schools (economical, maintanance, etc.)

* may even feel threatened by the board of governors *("by incompetent interventions of non-professionals")*
* may feel the low interest of parents and members of other groups involved

3. a lack of readiness of practically all groups involved, among them especially of:
* the Ministry of Education and the LEAs
* schools, their leaders and teachers
* parents
* local governments
* employers

4. worries (of schools but sometimes even of parents) about discrepancy between power and responsibility given to boards of governors by the legislation

5. distrust of schools to the new phenomena, disbelief of many others involved in its benefit

6. worries about difficulties to control the work of the boards.

On the other hand, there are quite a few positive expectations of schools connected with boards of governors. According to these, boards of governors could:

- help to make firmer the position of the school in the local community
- help to develop more fully school's external relations
- support the school's strive for its openess
- become a source of feedback for the school
- help the school in conflict resolution cases
- enable the school to cooperate with public in the development of such essential matters (plans of the school's development, set up of school's priorities, etc.)
- help to improve material basis of the school
- help to develop an extracurricular programs of the school
- help to involve parents more fully in the school work
- help to improve information process and consequently avoid the conflict caused by the uninformedness

It seems the change agents have not managed to introduce the idea of school local governance in a successful way yet. It also seems, the needs for the management of the whole process are quite evident. At the moment, boards of governors are often viewed by many practitioners as a good idea immediate practical benefit of which is rather questionable, though. In reality, there are only a few of them existing in a meaningful way.